Opening Statement
Chairman Dan Burton
Subcommittee on Human Rights and Wellness
Committee on Government Reform
Title: *"The Environmental Impact of Mercury-Containing Dental Amalgams"*
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Recently, there was an incident at a local Washington, DC high school that rightfully received front-page news coverage and that dramatically illustrates the danger of mercury toxicity.

Just last week, several students walked into an unlocked chemistry lab, stole a vial of mercury, and decided to splash it all over the floors and walls of the school.

The result was an immediately evacuation and closure of the building. And the building could be closed for as long as four months while authorities work to ensure that all traces of the mercury have been eliminated.

During the extensive clean-up process, students will have to attend classes in uncontaminated buildings, and they have been instructed to turn in the clothes and shoes they wore on the day of the incident to have them decontaminated.

I am sure everyone here today would agree that these precautions make perfect sense in order to safeguard and protect the health of the students, teachers, and staff.

I personally believe that there is no more important function of government than doing everything in its power to protect the health and well-being of its citizens.

That is why as Chairman of the House Committee on Government Reform, and now as Chair of the Subcommittee on Human Rights and Wellness, I have led a 2-year long investigation into the dangers of using highly toxic mercury in every day medical and dental procedures.

Mercury is one of the most toxic elements found in nature, second only to radioactive materials.

While some minerals are beneficial to human life, mercury is most assuredly not, because the human body was not designed or ever meant to ingest mercury. Consequently, the human body has no effective filter or elimination system for it. The end result is that much of the ingested mercury accumulates in the body's tissue, including the nervous system and vital organs such as the brain.

Previous Committee and Subcommittee hearings have focused on the dangers of mercury-containing thimerosal in vaccines, and mercury-containing dental amalgam fillings.

In each case, credible witnesses provided clear and convincing scientific testimony that links mercury in the human body to a variety of developmental and neurological disorders, from modest declines in intelligence quotient (IQ) to tremors, Alzheimer's disease, and autism.

As the dangers of mercury have become more widely understood, government agencies on the Federal, State and local level have acted to eliminate mercury from common items like thermometers, blood pressure gauges, light switches, cosmetics and teething powder.

Yet, despite all the evidence to the contrary, mercury amalgam fillings continue to be routinely used in human dentistry.

Collectively, Americans are walking around today with 800 metric tons of mercury in their mouths. And tens-of-millions of mercury-containing fillings continue to be put into American teeth every year.

In spite of overwhelming evidence that mercury is especially dangerous to young children and women of childbearing age, millions of mercury amalgams continue to be placed in their mouths every year as well.

And Dentists cannot honestly claim that they are not aware of the dangers of mercury. In fact, dentists take routine precautions against this dangerous substance. Mercury-containing amalgam scraps, and extracted teeth with amalgam fillings, according to protocol must be stored in sealed jars under liquid until a special hazardous materials recycler picks them up for safe disposal.

If dentists are aware of the dangers of mercury, why is this toxic material still being used? The answer is that the dental establishment continues to hold to the scientific fiction that a material that is hazardous <u>before</u> it goes into the mouth, and hazardous after it comes back <u>out</u> of the mouth, is somehow perfectly safe while contained <u>in</u> the mouth.

This disconnect in logic simply does not make sense and it flies in the face of a growing body of credible scientific evidence.

The fact is that dentistry continues to dangerously expose humans to mercury, both through direct implantation of amalgam into patients' teeth, and again during the disposal process by increasing the amount of mercury in our wastewater treatment plants.

The Association of Metropolitan Sewerage Agencies (AMSA) estimates that on-average, dentists contribute 35 to 40-percent of the influent mercury received by publicly-owned sewerage treatment plants. In many municipalities, dentists are the single largest source of wastewater mercury.

And as an element, mercury remains always mercury. Wastewater treatment plants cannot simply treat it; it must be completely removed from the wastewater stream.

If the mercury is not removed, heavy particles of mercury settle into treatment plant sludge. Eventually, that sludge either gets incinerated, releasing its mercury directly into the atmosphere, or it gets spread out on agricultural fields as fertilizer. Over time, bacteria help recirculate that mercury back into the environment.

So, mercury that ultimately escapes into the environment inevitably ends up in the food we eat and the air we breathe.

AMSA has estimated that it costs as much as $21 Million per pound to safely remove mercury once it becomes part of the wastewater stream. If the American Dental Association's estimate is correct that approximately 6.5 tons of mercury enter public wastewater treatment facilities from dental offices every year, at $21 Million per pound, the cost to remove that amount of mercury would be approximately $273 Billion annually. That is a staggering amount of money.

A more cost effective solution, in my opinion, would be to simply stop the mercury contamination at the source, within the dentists' offices.

The technology to do just that exists today, the only thing standing in the way of using it is professional inertia.

Today's hearing will examine the facts surrounding dental amalgam's impact on the environment, discuss some cost-effective measures to mitigate that impact, and to promote improved mercury-safe communities for all Americans. I look forward to hearing what our expert witnesses have to say.